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THE LOST DIAMOND,

By Mrs. MARGARET HOSMER,

Author of "Mystery of the Reef," "The White Girl of the Ridge," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

A STRANGE VISITOR.

Geoffrey Maynard occupied a magnificent house in the most aristocratic portion of Belgrave Square, and held bachelor sway over his spenders, aided by an experienced housekeeper who had been in charge of the grand establishment in his uncle's time, from whom he had inherited the mansion and great wealth besides.

The elder Maynard had been dead only a year, and the young heir was just beginning to entertain at home, when one cold wintry evening he was interrupted in his billiard room, whither he had retired with a few choice dinner guests to smoke and play, by his servant's announcement:

"A queer looking man wants to see you, sir, on most particular business."

Geoffrey changed color, as if the slight description gave him a clue to an unwelcome visitor, and hastily excusing himself to his friends, he descended to the hall, where the footman said the man was waiting.

"I didn't think he was one to show in to any of the apartments, sir," the servant said, "and if he hadn't been so pressing, I would not have troubled you on his account any way, for he's a rough looking customer, sir."

They had reached the first landing on the stairway, and standing directly under the lamp in the hall below, they could see a short man, coarsely dressed, with a shaggy cap drawn close over a low, forbidding brow, and frayed old coat, forlornly huddled around the lower part of his face.

He stood in a lounging attitude, with both hands thrust in his pockets, and seemed to take in a comprehensive view of his surroundings with his narrow, cunning eyes.

Mr. Maynard no sooner caught sight of him than his whole manner changed to one of great alarm, if not of abject fear, and he retreated back a pace or two, jostling his servant, who was following him at a respectful distance.

"It—it—it's a beggar, no doubt," muttered his master, in a hurried, trembling voice. "Just bid him step this way into my library—I'll see him there—it may be a case of destitution that I shall feel called on to relieve."

The man knew full well that Mr. Maynard's benevolence was not of an active order, and rather wondered at its being appealed to so suddenly by such an object, but he obeyed at once, and without comment, and the stranger following his direction ascended the stairs briskly, and was shown into the library.

The gentleman who was seated in a high-backed, easy chair before the large table in the center of the room, did not turn until he heard the door close, and knew that he and his visitor were alone.

Then he swung himself around suddenly, and demanded:

"What in the devil's name brings you here, Matt Brice? I thought I was rid of you for good."

"Yes, I dare say," retorted the man, with something like a snarl; "but I've turned up again, you see, and I've got something to say that you can hear or not, just as you please."

"Something to say to me?" exclaimed Geoffrey Maynard, sharply; "say it then, and remember that your presence here is a dangerous experiment that must not be tried long."

"Oh, as for the matter of that," replied the man, with an angry grin, "if you'd rather have me leave, I'm not anxious to stay. My news is worth money elsewhere, and I can make it pay as well, and get more thanks, too."

"What news? Speak out, fellow!" cried Geoffrey, starting in his chair and clutching the man's arm. "Say what you mean, and don't play with me; I'm not in a humor for it."

"I ain't no notion of playing, myself. I've had too long a pull in the stone jug for such fun to be left in me," said Matt, bluntly. "You said you thought you'd got rid of me, and I know what you mean. You expected the tin you gave me two years ago was going to make my everlasting fortune, but it didn't. It only made me flush enough to get into trouble, and so I was lagged for eighteen months at hard work, and I've served it out to a day, so no man can't put a finger on me."

"Did you come here to tell me this, and beg for more?" demanded the gentleman, contemptuously.



"No, I didn't," retorted the other, in a tone of anger. "I come because I had something to tell, which I suppose you would like to know. But since you're so hard on a fellow, there's no use for me—"

"Speak out!" exclaimed Mr. Maynard, fiercely.

"Well, then," said Matt, with great deliberation, "I saw a young girl down by Graf's Lane not two hours since that I know'd the minute I clapped my eyes on her to be—"

"Hush!" almost shrieked his companion, starting from his chair and grasping him by both arms. "Do you not know that walls have ears! Never breathe that name in this house, not even in a whisper."

Then, conquering his excitement by a strong effort, he asked, in a quieter tone: "Do you mean Michael Edridge's daughter, Nora?"

Matt Brice raised his small, leering eyes to Maynard's face and looked at him with a strange expression, as he nodded several times in reply.

"Where are they?" interrogated Geoffrey, breathlessly. "I have sought them in vain, until I became at last convinced that they had left the city, and in that belief I have roamed for some months past quite secure."

"They have never stirred from the neighborhood of Graf's, though their loss of money and work has compelled them to move back in the lane in a poor shanty that lets in the wet and cold, so that it is no wonder one of them died the other day."

"Nora?" cried his listener, eagerly: "was it Nora?"

Brice grinned maliciously as he answered: "No, hunger or cold don't hurt that girl; she looked as beautiful as an angel in spite of her rags, and the blue shivering cold that fanned her. It was the strong man Michael that died; he had been ill for months of a fever, and was out of work nearly a year on account of a row he had with Graf's foreman."

"So he took to drink, of course," suggested Mr. Maynard, with a sneer, "and that soon cooled his story."

"Very likely," answered Matt, unconcernedly. "But it is Nora I came to tell you of. I come upon her like a shot to-day, for I was feeling mighty blue; trade's dull at Mother Webb's, and a fellow just out, without a cent to begin on, is in a bad fix. As soon as I saw the girl, I nearly jumped for joy. There's plenty of money to be made out of her, says I to myself, and as Mr. Maynard has always done pretty fair by me, I'll give him the first chance, says I."

He beamed cunningly out of the corners of his eyes at this speech, and waited.

"You were right, quite right," said the other, eagerly, "and I'm glad we understand each other. I have an interest in keeping track of the girl as long as she is above ground; a greater still in ascertaining as soon as I can that there is no further necessity for that interest. Good Heaven, what can these paupers be made of that they can bear hunger, cold and abuse, and even survive deadly illness! This young girl

bears a charmed life, it seems; but before I put a value on the tidings you have brought me, I must be assured that it is herself beyond a doubt that you have discovered."

"Why, who else should it be?" exclaimed Brice.

Mr. Maynard looked at him with cold, searching eyes.

"Anybody else that would serve your purpose," he returned, pointedly. "According to your own story you are in no condition to be scrupulous; just out of prison, without a cent in your pocket, and no job of your sort ready to your hand. No, no; I must see the girl and be satisfied myself before I stir a step in the matter."

"All right," assented Brice, with a short laugh. "You're awful cunning, though; he! he! he! Who would think of a gent like you being so sharp; you're smarter than plenty of chaps belonging to the trade."

Without paying any attention to this compliment to his shrewdness, Mr. Maynard put an end to the interview abruptly by saying:

"I have company upstairs now, and cannot stay here any longer. You don't mind waiting outside, I dare say, and can keep this large window at my left in view from the street. When the light is put out you will notice it from that western corner, and in five minutes later I will join you on the lower side of the square."

"All right," returned Brice, with a meaning wink, and thrusting his hand into his pocket again, he lounged out of the room in his usual slow way, casting his eyes about secretly in every direction as he went.

The communication he had made to Mr. Maynard affected that gentleman more than he cared to confess. He did not at once ascend to join his friends in the billiard room, but remained a few moments in the library, as if schooling his face back into its usually pleasant expression before meeting their view.

Apparently it was not without effect that he accomplished this; he stood by the chair Matt Brice had occupied, pressing his carved back until the fingers on it indented themselves deep in his palms, and muttering to himself:

"So nothing will kill the little jade; she has a cat's life, it seems, and is fated to survive everything. Well, well, she must be hunted down, and this shuffling villain is safest when kept at work, so I'll give him the job of doing it."

He looked in the great mirror over the chimney-piece, pushed back his hair and smoothed his brow, and then went upstairs to his guests.

Two hours later, when the last one had departed for the night, their host rang for his slippers and dressing-stocks to be brought to the library, and told his man that he might retire.

"I shall sit up here and smoke and read for an hour or two, Pansy," he said, "and will not need you again to-night."

The valet had no sooner departed than he lowered the lights, drew on a pair of heavy boots and a large cloak he had conveyed there, and putting on a slouch hat, hurried downstairs and out into the cold dark street, unseen by any inmate of the house. At the lower side of the square he saw Brice on the watch, and turning down the first cross street leading to the lower part of the city gave him a sign to follow—at his heels.

CHAPTER II.

GRAF'S LANE.

They were entirely clear of the fashionable neighborhood in which Mr. Maynard resided, and had reached streets occupied by people of the poorer class, when he paused in his quick pace and allowed his follower to join him.

"Now, whereabouts is this Graf's lane that you spoke of?" he inquired; "there's the factory over there, and I suppose it's somewhere in that vicinity, isn't it?"

"Yes, captain," responded Matt, in a much more familiar manner than he had yet addressed Mr. Maynard; "that's the place, though you couldn't get to it very easy alone. You see the lane is a narrow sort of alley that winds in and out behind the courts, where the destitute houses are. There's pig-pens and cow-sheds in the lane, and tin houses are up at the further end beyond the dirt lot and the duck pond. I'm used to the locality, or I wouldn't feel like going

fully, "and I cannot blame them for what appears so very improper, but what else can I tell them:

